

Friday's Feature
By
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Gray leaf spot of St. Augustinegrass

Hot, humid conditions that are typical of our summer can intensify turf disease problems, especially when we encounter several consecutive days of cloudy, wet weather. One such disorder that is common on St. Augustinegrass is a fungal disease called gray leaf spot.

St. Augustinegrass is the only warm season turfgrass affected by this disease. As a matter of fact, I have seen centipedegrass intermingled with infected St. Augustinegrass and the centipedegrass does not show signs of gray leaf spot.

The most diagnostic disease symptom is a very distinguishable leaf spot or lesion. Individual lesions start off as tiny brown spots, smaller than a pinhead. As these circular spots become larger, they elongate and become oblong. The spots will be brown to grayish in color. Spots will eventually unite to turn entire blades yellow and then brown. Heavily infested



blades wither and cause the lawn to thin and generally look unhealthy. Gray leaf spot disease reduces turf vitality and can slow the grow-in of sprigged areas.

Cultivars of St. Augustinegrass differ in their susceptibility to gray leaf spot. Although no cultivar is immune to this disease, some are more resistant than others. Raleigh and Seville are two cultivars that show some resistance. Bitterblue and Floratam are more susceptible to gray leaf spot.

Gray leaf spot is frequently seen on newly sodded or sprigged St. Augustinegrass lawns. Once St. Augustinegrass is established in the landscape, the disease is persistent but usually not severe. During the summer months, individual St. Augustinegrass plants will always have a few spots on the leaf blades, but the overall health of the turfgrass is not affected unless the grass is placed under severe stress. To prevent or overcome this disease, it is critical that you maintain a healthy turf through good management practices.

One environmental condition that favors the spread of this disease is when leaf blades remain wet for more than twelve hours and air temperatures hover between 80 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Although we can't do much about the weather, we can control our irrigation. Overwatering or irrigating in the evening provides the prolonged period of wetness required for this disease to infect your lawn. Be sure to water only in the early morning hours and be finished by sunrise. The sun will dry off leaf tissue and eliminate long periods of wetness.

Excessive applications of quick-release nitrogen fertilizer enhance disease severity. Do not use readily available forms of nitrogen such as soluble liquids or quick-release nitrogen sources. Instead, use slow-release nitrogen sources. It is also beneficial to apply a fertilizer that contains equivalent amounts of nitrogen and potassium.

Gray leaf spot also tends to be worse in areas where the soil is compacted, such as areas that have frequent foot traffic. It is important to alleviate the compaction through mechanical aeration or reduce traffic in those areas.

Be sure to mow regularly at the proper height with a sharp blade and only when the turf is dry. If the ends of the grass blades are ripped or shredded due to a dull blade, the fungus has a much easier time invading the grass blade and producing symptoms.

Almost all St. Augustinegrass lawns will have some gray leaf spot disease. If the disease becomes a serious and persistent problem however, you may need a fungicide. Look for products containing propiconazole, thiophanate methyl or triadimefon. The strobilurin fungicides are among the most effective available. Always follow the product's label directions and precautions.

Tip of the Week: The large webs of the fall webworms can now be seen on pecan, oak and other landscape trees. The caterpillars may defoliate a branch or two but they rarely threaten the life of a tree. If you can reach it with a stick, wrap and destroy the webbing to expose the caterpillars to the elements and natural predators.

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